



Historic communications exercise was 'perfect'

Test included local, state and U.S. and Canadian agencies

By Tim Leeds
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A test of communications equipment funded by a federal grant included, for the first time ever to the knowledge of Hill County Sheriff Don Brostrom, law enforcement officials from the United States and Canada communicating seamlessly with each other.

"It's pretty historic," Brostrom said Wednesday at the Hill County Justice Center before officials conducted a "hotwash" debriefing of the exercise. The exercise started in Valley County about 8 a.m., ran through Hill County and was moving west in its second half as the debriefing started in Havre about 11:30 a.m.

Brostrom said the exercise, designed to test communications equipment and its installation, along with other equipment allowing global-positioning-system location in the field and access of data, went better than expected.

"Perfect," added Tim Lambourne of the U.S. Border Patrol, Havre Sector.

The field exercise included testing the latest additions to interoperability communications systems installed on the Northern Tier of Montana, which was planned to create microwave-relay communications stretching from Lincoln County in northwest Montana to the North Dakota border.

Montana received a \$3.9 million grant — one of seven in the nation — through the U.S. Department of Justice's Border Interoperability Demonstration Project — called BID-P by participants.

Part of that grant was used to install five new relays including in Valley County north of Opheim, and another in the Bear Paw Mountains in Hill County.

Brostrom said earlier this week that the plan was to use the grant to install three new relays — but the people working on the project saved enough money to allow installing five.

Throughout the exercise, officials working on conducting and monitoring the test would "inject" incidents, telling law enforcement officials that something had occurred and monitoring their response and how the equipment worked.

Brostrom said the test showed the new Valley County relay is working — he was in Hill County near the Canadian Border talking to an undersheriff in Valley County on his digital radio.

"It was clear, like we were standing right next to each other," he said.

Another part of the test involved amending a 1952 treaty* to allow officials on both sides of the border to talk on the same frequency — which also tested flawlessly, Brostrom and Lambourne said.

Part of the BID-P grant was used to install communications equipment at border ports, and the treaty was amended to use a channel — the “BLUE” workgroup used for emergencies — by both U.S. and Canadian law enforcement and disaster personnel within 10 miles — 16 kilometers — of the border.

The BLUE workgroup is used to allow representatives of different agencies to communicate on the same channel during an emergency, rather than having to relay messages.

Brostrom said the group involved the U.S. Secretary of State’s office and the Canadian federal government in amending the treaty to allow cross-border communications.

The exercise Wednesday had local Montana and Canadian provincial and federal law enforcement representatives along with Border Patrol agents and Customs and Border Protection officials at the ports talking to each other.

Another part of the test was checking how the GPS monitoring allowed by the communications equipment worked — which also was successful.

Brostrom said the equipment gave the precise location of the officers in the field, which then could be relayed to other law enforcement and disaster personnel, including directly to mercy flights trying to reach people injured in an accident or during an incident.

One part of the test did not work, due to a technical difficulty in Helena. The grant funded setting up mobile data terminals in the field, which could be used to find information, such as running a license plate or registration or a criminal history check by officers in the field.

A problem with the server in Helena prevented that test. Work is being done to resolve that problem, Brostrom said.

The next step will be for officials to review and compile the results of the exercise from the debriefings in Havre and in Kalispell. Brostrom said the report from that step likely will be available later in the spring.

*** Correction:** The 1952 treaty was not amended. On December 10, 2012, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) expanded the purpose of the 155.4750 MHz frequency to allow for cross-agency use with Canadian responders within 16 km (10 mi) of the US-Canadian border.